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The Women Organizations and Activism in Combating Domestic Violence in the North Caucasus

By Saida Sirazhudinova¹

Abstract

There are a wide range of forms of domestic violence in the North Caucasus. Recent years have shown the scale of its spread and the complexity of the fight against domestic violence in the region. The spread of domestic violence in the region is facilitated by the residents themselves, traditional institutions, and religious structures that increase their influence. In addition, the authorities are not interested in solving the problems of domestic violence, and they hinder the work of human rights organizations and activists in every possible way. This article describes the features of the fight against domestic violence in the North Caucasus. The role of NGOs that oppose extreme and specific forms of domestic violence practices (female genital mutilation and honor killings) in the region is significant. The role and prospects of women's and NGOs' activities in overcoming these problems are shown. This article is based on the primary and secondary analysis of the results of qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the project "Legal initiative" and the Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional problems "Caucasus. Peace. Development."

Keywords: Domestic violence, Gender studies, Women's activism, Gender, NGOs, Civil society, Qualitative research, Quantitative research, Analysis of judicial practice

Introduction

Recently, the North Caucasus has attracted attention due to the public disclosure of cases and forms of domestic violence that have been widely discussed in the media around the world. There are also common forms of domestic violence associated with the local characteristics of society, traditionalism, and neo-Islamization in the region.

Human rights organizations (for example - Stichting Justice Initiative²) and several women activists have played an important role in exposing the problem of violence against women and in initiating public discussions. The activity of a small number of activists (from the Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional Problems' "Caucasus. Peace. Development"³) was first identified and highlighted by the problem of FGM, which was not previously associated with this region. Human rights defenders have found an approximate

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² see: <https://www.srji.org/en>

³ see: <http://center-kmr.ru/tag/kavkaz-mir-razvitie>

minimum scale of honor killings, problems of blackmailing girls, impunity for the death of girls due to domestic violence.

Domestic violence is an extremely complex problem for the region. More than 80% of respondents say that the problem is relevant for women in the North Caucasus and noted that they have heard about domestic violence from their immediate environment (according to the Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional Problems' "Caucasus. Peace. Development")⁴.

At the same time, this problem is taboo for society. Local scientists have ignored it for decades and, in their research, sidestep all pressing issues, especially the problems related to the violation of women's rights through traditions, such as female circumcision, honor killings, forced marriages, etc. Therefore, an analysis of the problem of domestic violence and an understanding of its specifics is necessary and relevant not only for the region, but also for other countries where victims of domestic violence seek refuge from their aggressors.

The problem of domestic violence in the North Caucasus has not been sufficiently investigated. The main sources for understanding the problem are theoretical works that initiated the study of domestic violence, research on domestic violence in the North Caucasus, reports of human rights organizations, and media publications.

There are only a few scientific works by Russian authors that address the problems (Y. Karpov, S. Sirazhudinova) in Russia. Russian ethnographer Y. Y. Karpov was the first to voice the problem of female circumcision in Dagestan in his work "Women's space in the culture of the peoples of the Caucasus"⁵.

The Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional problems "Caucasus. Peace. Development" found a problem of FGM in Ingushetia, among the members of the Vird Battal-Hadji, a small closed religious community in Ingushetia, and residual traces of the practice in the areas of Chechnya bordering Dagestan⁶.

Discussion at the round table "Gender Issues. Domestic Violence: Problems of Prevention and Overcoming" at the international conference "Women's Activism: History and Modernity" (January 21, 2021) showed that the topic is closed to most local scientists. At the conference, scientists made such statements as "Why is this a problem (FGM), if it is a tradition? Tradition, it's not a problem!". "There are taboo topics that cannot be discussed, because it is a tradition"⁷.

In the region, it is not customary to notice and discuss domestic violence, female circumcision, or honor killings. Gender-based violence in traditional and religious societies built on patriarchal foundations is driven by the desire to preserve patriarchy, ensure control over women, restrict them, and ensure order at their expense. Here the power over a woman, her body and even her spirit, belongs to the family and men. The theory of sexual control is intertwined with

⁴ Women's Activism: History and Modernity: the International conference proceedings. Eds. S. V. Sirazhudinova, O. S. Mutieva. Makhachkala: ALEF, DSUE, 2021. 324 pages. DOI 10.33580/9785001286608. <http://center-kmr.ru/gendernye-issledovaniya/zhenskaya-aktivnost-istoriya-i-sovremennost-materialy-konferentsii/attachment/konferentsiya-sbornik/>

⁵ Yuriy Karpov (2001) Women's space in the culture of the peoples of the Caucasus, St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie.

⁶ Saida Sirazhudinova (2016) The attitude toward female circumcision in the Dagestan society: "this is not something one speaks about loudly!", *Etnograficeskoe Obozrenie*, 2016, 5, 167-174.

⁷ Women's Activism: History and Modernity: the International conference proceedings. Eds. S. V. Sirazhudinova, O. S. Mutieva. Makhachkala: ALEF, DSUE, 2021. 324 pages. DOI 10.33580/9785001286608. <http://center-kmr.ru/gendernye-issledovaniya/zhenskaya-aktivnost-istoriya-i-sovremennost-materialy-konferentsii/attachment/konferentsiya-sbornik/>

the practice of gender relations, which are based on the control of women and their sexuality. These practices are closely related to the theory of sexual control⁸. I consider the problem from the standpoint of feminism and the universality of human rights, while society is dominated by sentiments associated with cultural relativism.

Methodology

This work is based on the analysis of scientific literature and the results of qualitative and quantitative research of the author on gender issues (gender equality, female circumcision, female radicalism), conducted over more than 10 years in different republics of the North Caucasus. The Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional Problems "Caucasus. Peace. Development", carried out a sociological study titled, "I can't say!: violence in the North Caucasus" (N=540 people, 510 of them participated in a quantitative study, the method was a questionnaire, and 30 people participated in a survey of women and experts, the method was a standardized interview)⁹.

In the period from summer to winter of 2020, I conducted quantitative research in four republics of the North Caucasus within the framework of the above-mentioned organization "Social Activity of Women in Socio-Political Processes in the Republics of the North Caucasus"¹⁰, one of the blocks of which was to study the problem of domestic violence in the region. The research sample is 1075 respondents (1000 in a quantitative study and in 75 qualitative research among experts and activists).

Domestic Violence in the Region

We consider the problem of domestic violence as complex violence against family members, which includes the whole range of forms of moral, psychological, and material violence to various degrees of forms of physical violence (sexual violence, beatings, harm to health, murder) carried out by partners, family members, and relatives¹¹.

To the problem of domestic violence, we also refer to various forms of violence that a part of society identifies with traditions and customs (sexual control and control over movements, behaviors and socializing, bride kidnapping, forced marriages, honor killings, female genital mutilation). All the above forms are still common in the North Caucasus. Even feminism in the region focused on women's survival is concerned with human rights, women's rights, and fights primarily against domestic violence.

⁸ Hyde, J. S., DeLamater, J. D. (1997) *Understanding Human Sexuality*, Boston: McGraw-Hill. McIntosh, M. (1978) Who needs prostitutes? The ideology of male sexual needs, in: Smart, C., Swart, B. (eds), *Women, Sexuality and Social Control*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 53—64.

⁹ Saida V. Sirazhudinova (2017) "I can't tell about it": the domestic and sexual violence in the republics of the North Caucasus (Based on the sociological research data in the Republic of Dagestan), *Woman in Russian Society*, 4 (85), 26—35. DOI: 10.21064/WinRS.2017.4.3

¹⁰ Women's Activism: History and Modernity: the International conference proceedings (2021). DOI 10.33580/9785001286608. <http://center-kmr.ru/gendernye-issledovaniya/zhenskaya-aktivnost-istoriya-i-sovremennost-materialy-konferentsii/attachment/konferentsiya-sbornik/>

¹¹ Saida V. Sirazhudinova (2017) "I can't tell about it": the domestic and sexual violence in the republics of the North Caucasus (Based on the sociological research data in the Republic of Dagestan), *Woman in Russian Society*, 4 (85), 26—35. DOI: 10.21064/WinRS.2017.4.3

Female Genital Mutilation in the North Caucasus

The Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional Problems “Caucasus. Peace. Development”, played an important role in the discovery and disclosure of the problems of female circumcision. Research conducted between 2012-14 in the first mass survey of its kind, interviewed approximately two thousand respondents. The work was published in 2016 in the journal "Ethnographic Review" under the title “The attitude toward female circumcision in the Dagestan society: ‘this is not something one speaks about loudly!’”¹². It turned out that thousands of girls become victims of this operation every year. At the same time, the study showed that more than 80% of Dagestan society has an extremely negative attitude to this practice, while 17% have not heard of the existence of such a thing.

The study of the "Legal Initiative" was conducted in 2016 through field interviews with respondents¹³. Experts did interviews with those who underwent this operation. The next report in 2018 focused on areas where female circumcision is not practiced at all. It turned out that the geography is much wider than that outlined in the first report.

The reaction of the Russian civil society to the report of the legal initiative was very noticeable. The media joined the discussion of the first human rights report, and experts and public opinion leaders expressed their attitude to the problem. The society was divided into different opinions. Some supported human rights defenders, some criticized, and some threatened the authors of the report.

Civil society played an important role in highlighting and exposing the problem of FGM. Human rights activists showed the problem, and independent media began to follow the development of the situation and talk about the problem. At the same time, only a small part of civil society was able to talk about the problem. Most of the society, including the civil society, is not ready to talk openly about the problem.

Indicative of the closeness of this issue for most of the Russian scientific community was the cancellation of the meeting of the Central Asian-Caucasian seminar of the IEA of the Russian Academy of Sciences with the report "Female circumcision" among the peoples of Dagestan and the North Caucasus: ritual practices, ideas and modern realities"¹⁴, in April 2021. At this they announced the report for the first time, affirmatively stating the problem, but then decided not to discuss the FGM problem in the region.

Honor Killings

Another dangerous problem associated with extreme forms of domestic violence is honor killings. The rise of honor killings occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Honor killings occurred on a much smaller scale during the Soviet period.

This problem also did not become urgent for researchers and was ignored for many years. The first comprehensive study of honor killings in Russia was found in a study published in the

¹² Saida Sirazhudinova (2016) The attitude toward female circumcision in the Dagestan society: "this is not something one speaks about loudly!", *Etnograficeskoe Obozrenie*, 2016, 5, 167-174.

¹³ Female Genital Mutilation of Girls in Dagestan (Russian Federation) (2016), https://www.srji.org/upload/iblock/52c/fgm_dagestan_2016_eng_final_edited_2017.pdf

¹⁴ "Female circumcision" among the peoples of Dagestan and the North Caucasus: ritual practices, ideas and modern realities", 22.04.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/events/2881857872082045/>

2018 report "Killed by Gossip"¹⁵. The study was conducted by the method of in-depth interviews. The study identified 33 cases of honor killings and 39 victims from 2008 to 2017.

Officials began accusing the researchers of writing lies about honor killing after the report was published. This was the reason for a new study, a method of analyzing judicial practice. Since not all court verdicts are available for review in Russia, only minimal results were obtained.

The researchers found 43 cases and 48 victims of honor killings, even more than in the first report. Even though the analysis of judicial practice has confirmed the existence of honor killings, the local NGOs do not fight the problem. Honor killings are committed by relatives due to the claims of the "immoral behavior of the victim" and the damage it causes to the honor of a family to rehabilitate the honor of a family of a girl convicted of causing shame to her entire family before society, "to wash away the stain from the family"¹⁶.

Aside from human rights defenders, in particular the "Legal Initiative" that voiced the problem, the Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional problems "Caucasus. Peace. Development" and small groups of women activists and the media that voice high-profile crimes, no one from civil society has taken care of this problem.

The Role of NGOs in Identifying, Publicizing, and Solving Problems

The role of organizations in the fight against domestic violence is significant. Thanks to the initiative of non-profit organizations Legal Initiative and the Center for Research on Global Issues of Modernity and Regional Problems' "Caucasus. Peace. Development", the public learned about the problem. There was a response and a public discussion. Journalists and community activists have joined in solving the problem of domestic violence. But there are very few initiatives against domestic violence. There is no support for civil society. Women's rights organizations located in Moscow began to report the problem mainly. They began to include references to the problem in their reports, publications, and speeches. But there is almost no support from local organizations at the moment. The problem is so vulnerable that society preferred to remain silent about them even in the Soviet years, when the policy of increasing the role of women in society was carried out. Society is silent now.

The survey of activists and NGOs (75 interviews)¹⁷ showed that they ignore this problem for several reasons. They prefer not to interfere in matters related to the personal, private sphere of people's lives. Some social activists support discriminatory and criminal practices. They associate them with traditionalism and concern for women. They consider the violence that occurs in families to be personal and private.

The significant part of the society is simply silent and ignores them as much as possible, not wanting to associate their name with an acute and unpopular topic. This is due to the imitation and building of civil society "from above" by supporting initiatives aimed at traditional

¹⁵ Antonova Yu.A., Sirazhudinova S.V. (2018) Killed by gossip "Honor killings" of women in the North Caucasus. Report on the results of a qualitative study in the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya (Russian Federation, <https://www.srji.org/upload/medialibrary/a3d/PPI-2018-12-18-Honor-killings-Eng-final.pdf>

¹⁶ Antonova Yu.A., Sirazhudinova S.V. (2018) Killed by gossip "Honor killings" of women in the North Caucasus. Report on the results of a qualitative study in the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya (Russian Federation, <https://www.srji.org/upload/medialibrary/a3d/PPI-2018-12-18-Honor-killings-Eng-final.pdf>

¹⁷ Women's Activism: History and Modernity: the International conference proceedings. Eds. S. V. Sirazhudinova, O. S. Mutieva. Makhachkala: ALEF, DSUE, 2021. 324 pages. DOI 10.33580/9785001286608. <http://center-kmr.ru/gendernye-issledovaniya/zhenskaya-aktivnost-istoriya-i-sovremennost-materialy-konferentsii/attachment/konferentsiya-sbornik/>

(patriarchal) values. Thus, the majority of Russian NGOs are focused not on expressing the interests of groups of society, but on supporting the policy of the state. Therefore, until the state authorities declare the need to solve the problem "from above", most of civil society will remain silent and distance itself from the problem. Thus, they choose a strategy of cooperation¹⁸ and adapt to the peculiarities of the state regime and imitate public activity. Most women's organizations are imitative and do not protect women. Women's organizations created "from above" support patriarchal policies and promote "traditional values" that are opposed to gender equality and work to overcome decriminalization¹⁹.

On the other hand, most NGOs tend to distance themselves from unpopular issues that may harm them. The pressure on NGOs and activists engaged in domestic violence and the protection of women's rights is demonstrative. Vanessa Kogan, the director of the Legal Initiative, an organization that has been vocal about FGM, was forced to leave the country. The author of reports about female genital mutilations and honor killings after publication received threats²⁰. An activist, Elena Chufelina, who is engaged in helping victims of domestic violence²¹, was attacked, during which her health was harmed, and a criminal case was fabricated against her.

Activists who speak about the problem of domestic violence feel constant pressure and harassment from radical structures. NGOs and activists are afraid of criticism from society. Any statements about problems are perceived as damaging to the image of the republics and society, as "taking the trash out of the hut". At the same time, the situation with domestic violence in the region was highlighted thanks to the work of public activists and human rights organizations. Women activists play an important role in highlighting the issue and providing targeted assistance to women.

Some media outlets report on the issue raised by activists (the websites Daptar and the Caucasian Knot, and others). Several independent media outlets provide support in highlighting the problem and in disseminating information about the research results. Online media and social media groups report on the human rights work of organizations and activists fighting the problem of domestic violence (websites, groups in social networks such as "Mado" in Telegram²² and "Marem" on Instagram)²³.

Organizations and activists conduct research, bring issues out of the shadows, talk about issues, submit written recommendations regarding women's rights, organize public discussions, and hold action and rallies. The activists are opposed by influential and strong opponents, such as religious organizations (official ones), radical Islamists and nationalists, and their supporters.

¹⁸ David Lewis (2013) Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse, *Journal of Civil Society*, 9:3, 325-340, DOI: 10.1080/17448689.2013.818767

¹⁹ Women's Activism: History and Modernity: the International conference proceedings. Eds. S. V. Sirazhudinova, O. S. Mutieva. Makhachkala: ALEF, DSUE, 2021. 324 pages. DOI 10.33580/9785001286608. <http://center-kmr.ru/gendernye-issledovaniya/zhenskaya-aktivnost-istoriya-i-sovremennost-materialy-konferentsii/attachment/konferentsiya-sbornik/>

²⁰ "Legal Initiative" receives threats after "honour killings" report,: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45475/>

²¹ <http://center-kmr.ru/bez-rubriki/gendernye-problemy-i-domashnee-nasilie-v-rostovskoj-oblasti/>

²² t.me/madopage

²³ https://instagram.com/marem_group?utm_medium=copy_link

Conclusion and Recommendations

Domestic violence in the North Caucasus is one of the most ignored issues by scientists and politicians, and at the same time, the most pressing problem of the region. Progress in the fight against domestic violence is difficult and slow moving. There have been few changes. Those communities, groups, and villages where practices that discriminate against women are extremely slow to change due to their remoteness and orientation towards preserving traditions.

Society and patriarchal customs resist any attempts to combat domestic violence. In women's organizations and women's activism, many see a threat to the traditional and religious order, the identity of society. World practice shows us that changes are possible. But this is a long-term project. In our case, due to the lack of recognition of the problem, state programs, sanctions, condemnation, and the position of religious figures, we cannot expect a quick solution to the problem. But the work of organizations that oppose domestic violence will bring this solution closer, which will still come with its own small steps as research, reports, legal initiatives, women protection (legal and psychological) and will protect children and women from the physical and psychological consequences of discriminatory practices.